



New York

21st Century Community Learning Centers

SOARING BEYOND EXPECTATIONS

Meaningful Family Engagement Strategies for Expanded Learning Programs



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Overview

21st Century Community Learning Centers provide opportunities for children to thrive through expanded learning programs (academic and recreational enrichment taking place outside of school hours). These programs prioritize the whole child, offering various support services, community connections, and referrals, and can spark social, emotional, and academic growth in participants.

A cornerstone of success in expanded learning programs is a strong sense of partnership with families. Programs operating before and after school, on weekends, and during the summer, have a unique platform to connect with families. These programs also have the unique challenge of helping parents see the importance and benefits of their offerings.

This toolkit provides insights, examples, and resources to support family engagement efforts within expanded learning programs. Program staff can use these tools to foster meaningful relationships and build inclusive offerings for families.

Note: This document references family engagement requirements as described in the [21st CCLC Site Monitoring Visit \(SMV\) Tool](#), and will be noted as “SMV” with the applicable indicator reference.

“family engagement is about reaching families where they live, especially those who might be most underserved, **creating meaningful and trusted relationships** with families, **raising up their concerns and strengths**, and **expanding opportunities and resources** for how families love and learn with their children...”

-[Family Engagement Core Competencies](#), *National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement*

What is family engagement?

“Family engagement is a shared responsibility in which schools and other community agencies and organizations are committed to reaching out to **engage families in meaningful ways** and in which families are committed to **actively supporting their children’s learning and development,**” and continues across a child’s life and learning settings (Reference: [National Association for Family, School, and Community Engagement, NAFSCE](#)).

This definition implies a **collaborative relationship between schools, expanded learning programs, and families** that empower families to actively support children’s social, emotional, and academic success. Family engagement differs from family involvement, which focuses on the activities at home or school that families partake (Reference: [An Investigation of Teachers’ Attitudes Towards Parental Involvement](#)). Instead, family engagement involves shared responsibility and leadership which **appreciates and leverages the important role of a family in their child’s life.**

Why is family engagement important in expanded learning programs?

Expanded learning programs and families share **mutual benefits** from family engagement practices. Through these programs, families have an additional opportunity to engage in their child’s education outside of the regular school day, which acts as a **bridge between families and schools.** This is particularly important in under-resourced populations, where programs can leverage their relationships with families to communicate about how their child is doing in school, and how they benefit from attending the program (such as receiving meals and academic support).

These programs also provide **wraparound services to families,** such as counseling, adult education classes, and connecting them to social services, giving parents the tools they need to support their child’s success. In turn, family engagement is **likely to improve program attendance and engagement,** and supports overall quality of the program (Reference: [Afterschool Alliance](#)).

Tip # 1: Establish trust and build authentic relationships

Parents and families need to feel valued, included, and connected within a program culture through authentic relationships. Consider ways to promote a sense of inclusion and belonging:

Strategy:	Action Item:
Establish a solid foundation – indicate program values and the importance of a successful parent partnership	*Share your program’s family engagement values in the Student and Family Handbook (SMV, E-5)
Recognize the apprehension some families may have with school systems or establishments – acknowledge their experiences and approach interactions with sensitivity	*Ask families what supports they need to be successful (SMV, E-6, G-2, G-4) *Share positive news – send home “Keep it Positive” postcards to highlighting something positive their student achieved
Demonstrate consistency and transparency around programming, policies, and communication	*Create ongoing check-ins for family input, share staffing or program updates
Devote resources to coordinate with family members and facilitate community connections	*Designate staff position or process with direct pathways for communication with families
Ensure that program communication and engagement is accessible to everyone	*Design materials for families that are easy to use/read, translate as needed (SMV, E-5, E-6) *Ask families what mode of communication works best for them



Promising Practice: *Designate a Family Liaison*

Designate a Family Liaison to build authentic relationships with families. The presence of a consistent and positive face will help to establish trust of the program and school. The Family Liaison may be responsible for communicating with families to define needs, overcome barriers, share announcements and achievements, and promote engagement in program and school efforts. As trust is built, families will be more likely to engage in program offerings.

Featured Resource:

Edutopia outlines [20 Tips for Developing Positive Relationships With Parents](#).

Tip # 2: Identify and understand family needs

Prioritize collecting feedback and acknowledging parent perspectives to help families feel respected and part of the community, while providing staff with valuable insight about community concerns (SMV, G-2, G-4). Explore the following strategies:

Strategy:	Action Item:
Engage in active listening - approach conversations and interactions with care	*Provide staff with resources about using a trauma-informed approach and building reflective practices for themselves and with families
Conduct a needs and assets assessment to understand pain points, challenges, and priorities for students and families	*Include topics such as logistical issues and academic goals *Additional methods: focus groups, town halls, informal conversations
Utilize daily interactions to capture anecdotal feedback or insights	*Leverage existing touchpoints, including student pick-up times, phone calls, and emails to connect with families
Adjust or adapt initiatives as needed - communicate to families how the program will address relevant issues	*Share detailed plans that respond to evolving family needs to ensure people are heard and have a sense of program accountability
Consider the diverse family structures that exist within a community, which may be biological or non-biological, chosen, or circumstantial	*Remind staff to use language such as “parent/guardian” or “primary caregiver” to include a range of family members and people that play a pivotal support role in students’ lives
Align program content with the school day to enhance learning and relieve families of academic and homework support	*Designate an Education Liaison to communicate with teachers about needs that can be addressed through the program (SMV, F-1) *Ask families what academic topics should be addressed in the program



Promising Practice: Conduct a needs and assets assessment

Families are more likely to engage with the program when offerings reflect the actual needs of the community. Conduct an assessment to drive program activities for both students and families. Ask families what supports they need to address barriers to participation in special events, the program’s Advisory Board, and adult learning opportunities (ex: child care, transportation, meeting times).

Featured Resource:

Explore You for Youth’s [Family Satisfaction Survey](#), for sample tools to understand family perspectives.

Tip # 3: Provide opportunities for empowerment and leadership

Recognizing and empowering families as leaders in the program is a critical component of family engagement. The methods below can support purposeful collaboration:

Strategy:	Action Item:
Include family members in the planning and decision-making process – sharing power and ownership in the development of activities	*Organize a community service initiative or program-wide art project *Establish families as critical members of the Advisory Board (SMV, G-3), offering valuable insight regarding student needs
Provide opportunities for in-person conversation – limit mailings and sending documents home	*Leverage student pick-up times, phone calls, home visits, and events
Invite family members to share their skills, interests, and talents	*Incorporate family skills into program activities: reading to students, showcasing a cultural recipe, presenting about career pathways *Offer family volunteer opportunities
Connect families to each other – building connections within the community can enhance the parent/guardian network and generate ideas for program improvement	*Utilize open houses, family events, and social media to promote interaction
Recognize and thank families for their input	*Create certificates of appreciation, volunteer spotlights, or a year-end celebration event



Promising Practice: *Family participation in the Advisory Board*

Family members are critical to your program’s Advisory Board (SMV, G-3). Families’ knowledge about the needs of their children, community, and selves makes them valuable to planning and decision making. Recruit families by expressing the value of their role, and gratitude for their participation. Ask what time and location would most easily allow for their participation in meetings, and consider any transportation or child care needs.

Featured Resource:

Youth.gov describes strategies for [Engaging Families as Partners in Decision-Making](#).

Tip # 4: Develop meaningful and equitable opportunities for engagement

Consider providing a range of offerings and experiences that reinforce an inclusive program culture:

Strategy:	Action Item:
Create spaces and activities where staff can get to know families or engage in relevant activities	*Plan a Fall "meet and greet", peer networking, and learning opportunities
Lift up community voices and experiences to build a program culture that represents all families	*Consider holiday celebrations, special events, and program offerings that appeal to all community members
Offer home visits or plan gatherings in community spaces where people feel comfortable and have an established routine	*Explore local establishments (e.g., library, parks, places of worship) *Coordinate with school day staff and other agencies who may already be working with families
Coordinate with community organizations and institutions to link families to helpful resources and platforms	*Look into offerings for mental health supports, free adult education services, and other areas of interest
Ensure that all program and communication materials are translated into the family's language of comfort	*Work with school and community partners that may be able to provide translation services
Implement summer programming to keep students and families engaged all year round	*Needs may shift in the summer months – ask families how the program can be supportive *Invite families to an end-of-summer celebration



Promising Practice: *Family engagement in rural communities*

With limited transportation options, community resources, employment opportunities, and even internet access, many rural families are unable to access the supports they need. Asking families about barriers they face and adapting the program can increase engagement and attendance rates. Creative solutions to increase access may include providing gas cards, collaborating with schools to establish Wi-Fi hubs, conducting home visits, bringing services to the school building or local community center.

Featured Resource:

Afterschool Alliance outlines how [Afterschool Providing Key Literacy Supports to English Language Learner Students](#).

Tip # 5: Provide relevant adult learning opportunities

Empower families by offering educational opportunities to build upon their current experience and learn new skills. Consider the following when planning and designing adult learning opportunities:

Strategy:	Action Item:
Ask families what adult learning offerings would be of interest or helpful to them (SMV, G-4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Provide topic and content options as examples *Ask for additional program or curriculum ideas
Utilize adult learning theories and principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Create engaging lesson plans that offer experiential learning opportunities *Ask open-ended questions, and recognize their existing knowledge
Advertise offerings through platforms that families regularly access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Utilize social media or short video commercials *Promote events on the school’s communication platform *Partner with local establishments to help share information widely
Include event accommodations to address barriers to participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Offer child care, food options, and/or transportation
Consider offerings that are timely and relevant to families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Provide guidance for families to support students or navigate difficult issues, such as social emotional learning or digital literacy



Promising Practice: 4-A Learning Sequence

Utilize the [4-A Learning Sequence](#) when designing adult learning lesson plans, which utilizes methods most effective for adult learning. **Anchor** the learner to the topic – “why is this relevant to you?” **Add** information to increase their knowledge. **Apply** the new skills in an engaging way. Provide take **away** opportunities to incorporate the new skill in the immediate future.

Featured Resource:

The [Family Intentional Activity Design Planner](#) from You for Youth provides a template to map out program goals, activities, and strategies.

Tools and Resources

Explore additional platforms and guidance below:

Family Engagement Asset:	Source:
Strategies for Equitable Family Engagement	<i>State Support Network</i>
Family and Parent Engagement Resource Guide	<i>Afterschool Alliance</i>
Family Engagement Resources and Templates	<i>You For Youth</i>
The ABC's of Family Engagement	<i>National Afterschool Association</i>
Promising Partnership Practices	<i>National Network of Partnership Schools, Johns Hopkins University</i>
Family Engagement: A Guide to Tools, Strategies and Resources	<i>ExpandedED</i>
Engaging Families in Out-of-School Time Programs Toolkit	<i>Build the Out-of-School Time Network (BOSTnet)</i>
Engaging Families as Partners in Decision-Making	<i>Youth.gov</i>
20 Tips for Developing Positive Relationships With Parents	<i>Edutopia</i>
5 Ways Trauma-Informed Care Supports Children's Development	<i>Child Trends</i>
DEI Resource Portal	<i>NYSED Community Schools Technical Assistance Center</i>

